

The Construction of Jewish Cultural Identity in *The Ten Commandments* Movie

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Abstract—The research aimed to find out how Jews reconstructed their identity as a nation, religion, or as a part of American society through media and biblical movies. *'The Ten Commandments'* is one of the significant films to present Jews and Christianity in the framework of religious popular movies. From time to time, this narrative frequently interests the cineaste from both the Hollywood industry and television series. Despite various forms of representation on screen, the story of *The Ten Commandments* is exactly about the Torah, the biblical story about how God revealed the Ten Commandments through Moses to the people of Israel. This narrative is the primary source that is usually assumed as the basic understanding of Christianity and Judaism. Focusing on the Judeo-Christian heritage as represented in *The Ten Commandments*, the research applies the Critical Discourse Analysis by Van Dijk, and Stuart Hall's representation to see the relation of this notion to the acceptance of Jews among the Christians. The study finds that concerning their relationship with the Christians so far, for Jews, this kind of movie is like a voice of the Jews to see their relationship with Christians in a different way. The Jews, or the people of Israel, are indeed a part of Christianity. Both share similar narratives, messengers, experiences, and even conduct similar traditions of the ancient law, though the differences on theological structures between the two and disagreement toward certain things cannot be negotiated.

Keywords—Jews, identity, Judeo-Christianity, *The Ten Commandments*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Ten Commandments was one of the popular Hollywood movies along the centuries. From time to time, this narrative frequently attracts the cineaste from both the Hollywood industry and television series. This story also appears in animation or even video games. During the Hollywood production, there were several productions of the same story among others, *The Ten Commandments* in 1923 and 1956 by Cecil B. DeMille and Paramount Pictures, *The Prince of Egypt* in 1998 by Dream Works Pictures and recently in 2014, *Exodus: God and Kings*. This was aside from television series such as *The Ten Commandments* in 2006 by ABC television and from the animated movie in 2009.

Called a biblical movie, *The Ten Commandments* was a significant film to present Jews and Christianity in the framework of religious popular movies. The story of *The Ten*

Commandments was exactly about the Torah, the biblical story about how God revealed the Ten Commandments through Moses to the people of Israel. This narrative was the primary source that was usually assumed as the basic understanding of Christianity and Judaism.

The production of these movies is interesting because along the centuries, especially during the old tradition Europe, one of the sources of anti-Semitism was indeed the religious teachings in the churches. The focus of this study was *The Ten Commandments* of 1956. Some of the reasons were that this movie was one of the most popular movies ever made which was also produced in the era when the religious movies were very popular in Hollywood. It was also a collaborative work of Jews and Christian cineastes in the era when religious hatred and stereotype especially among the Jews both in Europe and America still occurred.

American Jews is essential here because along the century the involvement of American Jews in the Hollywood movie industry was more than just a success story of the immigrants in America. One of the Jews' strength in America was their involvement in media and film. The majority of the film industry founders were the Jews. As described by Neal Gabler [1], came in a large numbers mostly from Eastern Europe, the Jews then contributed to build and transform the Hollywood movies as the world icon.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Film has been more seen as a social practice which in Fairclough's Argument [2] has a dialectical relationship with other social dimensions. As he further insists, this form of social practice both constitutes the social world and is constituted by other social practices. In this sense, film offers a kind of concept whose ideas are derived from the social life which in the same way inspire or affect society as well. Furthermore, he also emphasizes that discourse is just one among many aspects of any social practice. It is a way of the dominant power to legitimate its interest toward a certain thing in any fields of background. It both reproduces and changes knowledge, identities and social relations including power relations, and at the same time is also shaped by other social practices and structures [3].

Here, related to the film, whatever presented in the movie is possibly comprehended in a different way by different people.

Though the industry often assumes that film has no effect on the viewers other than an entertainment, the construction of meaning is formed through a regular presentation. Since movies are played over and over, a constructed model which is represented will become knowledge which people believe, though it might not be true.

Besides, representation is related to the meaning of the concepts in our minds or the production of meaning through language [4]. It is connected with how to give meaning, to describe or to depict something. Here, the representation has never been a complete or a totally reflection of things, but much more than a combination of ideas of various elements [5]. As he further explains, in any representations there is a mixture of thing itself, such as the opinion of the people doing the representation, the reaction of the individual to the representation and also the context of the society in which the representation is taking place. In this sense, the designs, messages, and power behind the scene as well as how and why things are represented are kinds of the primary discourse in which the dimension of their impact is particularly intensive and broad.

Related to these aspects, it is appropriate to explain, film as a media of representation upon this discourse. As a means of communication, film is indeed a kind of message delivery from the producers to the audience. There is always a reciprocal influence between the producers and the audiences. As Fairclough [2] mentions, discourse is not only seen as constitutive but also constituted.

III. METHOD

This study made use of the story of *The Ten Commandments* which was exactly about the Torah as the main data. It was the biblical story about how God revealed the Ten Commandments through Moses to the people of Israel as the main data. This narrative was the primary source that was usually assumed as the basic understanding of Christianity and Judaism. Focusing on the Judeo-Christian heritage as represented in *The Ten Commandments*, the research applied Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis [6] and Hall's representation [4] to see the relation of this notion to the acceptance of Jews among the Christians.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Religious Movies and Jewish Stereotypes

The emergence of religious movies in the American industry is not such a coincidence. Miles said that the relationship of religion and movies actually existed since this industry began [7]. Photographic film itself, was invented by an Episcopal priest, Hannibal Goodwin. The first photographic film shown was *The Passion Play of Oberammergau* on January 31, 1898. Andre Bazin wrote that the cinema has always been interested in God [8].

In America, movies such as *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) by Sydney Olcott and *Judith of Bethulia* (1914) by D.W Griffith are considered as the earliest religious movies of American production. However, the Jewish involvement in

producing similar genres began in 1923 when *The Ten Commandments* was produced by Cecil B. DeMille of Paramount Pictures and was followed by *The King of Kings* (1927), as well as *Ben-Hur* (1927) by MGM Production. After the silent era, *Ben-Hur* and *The Ten Commandments* were remade by the same production companies, but with larger budgets and production values in 1959. *The King of Kings* by MGM followed in 1961.

The most interesting point of these remakes is not only about how to present similar narratives in a different way to a different audience, but also the 'impact' of those presentations, both in tangible or intangible forms. Miles explains that it is not accidental that the film's first topics were religious [7]. Film, as with religious dramas of the earlier age, was understood to have a tremendous capacity for generating and focusing the desires not only of an individual, but also of societies. Here, Miles says that the history of public entertainment also points to a larger purpose. The concurrence of religion and spectacle is not new. In this sense, we can say that as long as religions exist and are part of the human experience, religious themes will always interest the movie industry. This is because people or audiences prefer to see something that is close to them that represents their experiences. Religious film here is not only limited to the presentation of certain religions, religious narratives, or religious characters in the movie, but also the religious values and points of view, images both in direct or indirect representation.

Connected to Jews-Christians relationship in America, the hostility between Christians and Jews had existed since the early of Christianity. Though religious disagreement was considered as a source of the conflict between the two, especially since the Middle Ages, the major reason of anti-Semitism was based on social, racial, and political conflict. The source of the hatred itself, according to Telford [9] was the New Testament, the earliest Gospel from Mark to John. As he further mentioned, the earliest Gospel of Mark was the mainspring of the New Testament's derogatory picture of Jews and Judaism. The Jewish religion was depicted in a poor light, Jewish practices are disparaged, as are other practices Even Jesus himself was presented as more Gentile than Jewish. Similarly, as Telford insisted, these stereotypes were also for the Jewish people, their leaders, and even Jewish disciples. The Jewish authorities were depicted as hard of heart, as hypocrites, as guilty of the unforgivable sin in questioning the source of the Markan Jesus's power, and as wicked murderers for rejecting Jesus. Similarly, Holmes also says that the humiliation of the Jews became policy as well as doctrine [10]. The Church believed that to hate the Jews was the will of God. Jews were a people to be shunned or scorned, unworthy of association because of their presumed responsibility for decide in the death of Jesus.

Along with social and cultural prejudices, this kind of religious teachings had become a part of Europeans' understanding toward Jews for a long time and adopted into some works of literatures such as in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and Charles Dicken's *Oliver Twist*. In a similar way, the stereotypes of the Old World were then

imported and reproduced in the United States in a variety of media including film. Telford further mentions that when the biblical epics entered Hollywood productions, these kinds of Gospel interpretations of Judaism and Jewish stereotypes eventually appeared in various movies, though the number was not significant [9]. Such interpretations are clear in various biblical epics including the figure of Judas and Barabbas in *King of Kings*, the circumcision of Jesus in *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), or the denunciation of the Pharisees in *The Gospel according to St Matthew* (1964) and some movies adaptation from the existed literatures

B. Shared Narrative

The production of a biblical movie like *The Ten Commandments*, is like a voice of the Jews to see their relationship with Christians in a different way. The story of *The Ten Commandments* is exactly about the Torah, the biblical story about how God revealed the *Ten Commandments* through Moses to the people of Israel. In various versions, the plot is almost similar, portraying Moses as a hero for the people of Israel. This narrative is the primary source that is usually assumed as the basic understanding of Christianity and Judaism.

Concerning their relationship with the Christians so far, for Jews, one of the sources of anti-Semitism was indeed the religious teachings in the churches. Erens notes that the portrayal of Jewish life released for public consumption began during the formative years of Hollywood cinema [11]. In various types of movies, Jews regularly appeared in different portrayals, including as heroes. The depiction of Jews as heroes for both communities, namely Christians and Jews, was eventually seen in religious movies such as *Ben-Hur* and *The Ten Commandments*. Coincidentally, the two religions, in fact, do share similar narratives, thus, a common understanding among them was initially accomplished.

The portrayal of Moses as a great leader to save and protect his people against the Pharaoh is indeed constructed for the Abrahamic religion, especially Jews and Christianity. Here, the movie is trying to say that the Jews, or the people of Israel, are indeed a part of Christianity. Both share similar narratives, messengers, experiences, and even conduct similar traditions of the ancient law, though the differences on theological structures between the two and disagreement toward certain things cannot be negotiated. As Neusner mentions, related to the relationship between Christians-Jews as a family, only brothers can hate so deeply, yet accept and tolerate so impassively, as have Judaic and Christian brethren both hated, yet taken for granted, each other's presence [12].

The Ten Commandments is indeed about the Jews and their Bible, though Christians may argue in the same way. In this sense, it is interesting to see that when Cecil B. DeMille proposed to Adolf Zukor to remake the movie in 1956, instead of refusing, he even said "Well, I find it embarrassing and deplorable that it takes Cecil here – a Gentile, no less – to remind Jews of our heritage! What was World War II fought for anyway? We should get down on our knees and say 'thank you' that he wants to make a picture on the life of Moses" [13].

For Jews, although Judaism was still a minority compared with the two other religions, the symbolic status as one third of the 'triple melting pot' was a kind of blessing. As Sarna mentions, American Jews gained widespread recognition as America's 'third religion' along with Protestant and Catholic [14]. Fueled by postwar prosperity, Judaism also strengthened institutionally through the building of synagogues and religious schools and the development of new communal institutions. Whatever the case, religion, however, became the major vehicle for Jewish identity. As mentioned before, though the roots of 'this compromise' had begun since the founding of the nation, to acknowledge Judaism as a 'national' religion would definitely bring a positive impact on Jews. This acceptance has gradually omitted religious barriers among the three and developed religious dialogue as found today

Besides, the idea of Judeo-Christian tradition as represented in this movie, according to Neusner is not to compare the dissimilar theological concepts of the three that are normatively and authoritatively different [12]. As he explains, 'the two faiths (Judaism and Christianity) stand for different people talking about different things to different people,' but it is more on finding the similarities in cultural traditions of the three that have a similar source of faith. Similarly, Herbert argues that Christians and Jews were so closely interrelated as to make it virtually impossible to understand either without reference to the other [15]. They would not change their religion, because, from the beginning the structure of American society presupposed diversity and substantial equality of religious association.

C. Jewish Cultural Identity

Along the centuries, Jewish identity was closely related to the terms exile, *galut* or diaspora, Jews' condition from time to time. To be *galut*, as Gruen mentioned, is to be in the wrong place, it is to be dislocated, forced homelessness and the sense of things being not as they should be [16]. It also relates to the up-rootedness, dispersal, in which Jews should place themselves in the peripheral area from political and religious centers in any nation or community where they lived and it deeply lies in Jewish consciousness and persists as an integral part of the Jews; experience of history

Since the first exodus led by Moses, Jews had often empathized with any displacement, prosecution, forced migration, disintegration, or the kinds of discrimination in large and small scale that scattered them to all corners of the world. Thus, the movement of Jews from one region to another has contributed in shaping Jewish identity as both an ethnicity and a religion.

However, as a movie construction, it implies a hidden Jewish ideology in the framework of a Christian presentation. Related to Fairclough's notification, the focus of ideological conception here is not about the question of truths but more upon its effect in the context of social-cultural changes. Thus, relations between Jews and Christians in this movie are not about theological truth or religious differences, but more on finding the similar cultural relationship between the two. The conception of heroic Jews in the muscular, tall and good-

looking white man, like Moses attempt to confront the previous stereotyped images of Jews in society.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The research finds that media and film have become an area for Jews to 'verify' their identity as a nation, religion, or as a part of American society. Through the screens, Jews can speak about their problems, anxieties, existence, or even their dreams as being Americans and Jews. This has been ongoing since the rise of religious movies in the early days of movie industry. Taken mostly from Biblical narratives, the emergence of religious movies gives a distinct advantage for American Jews to promote themselves especially since they were in this medium from the very beginning. Here, when stereotypes were closely related to a religious area, religious movies were an effective way to alter that previous image. Reinforced by the Judeo-Christian tradition that grew in understanding after World War 2, Hollywood producers were inspired to produce movies from biblical sources shared by the two religions. In these movies, the 'old myth' about Jews is later reconstructed into a different way of presentations.

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